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INTRODUCTION

Yale offers its students many different study-space options. However, particularly given the incremental increase in the student body, study spaces have become scarcer on campus, and this problem will only worsen in the coming years.

Residential college dining halls are one study space option highly appreciated and utilized during reading period. However, during the rest of the school year, most colleges do not keep their dining halls open for study. This project investigated the possibility of keeping dining halls open as study spaces year-round, and whether there is interest from the student body to do so.

BACKGROUND

During reading period at the end of each semester, dining halls in every residential college open their doors to provide students with more space for quiet studying. Many students utilize the extra study space during this time, as it provides an extra, easily accessible place to study within their colleges. However, during the rest of the school year, most residential colleges do not offer this option, despite there being other times in the semester in which a high volume of students are studying for exams or writing papers. For example, the first (the week leading up to October Recess) and second (the week leading up to Thanksgiving Recess) rounds of midterms cause a rise in the utilization of study spaces and creates competition.

In 2013, Saybrook College instituted a year-round dining hall study hours policy. Some students choose to study in the dining hall instead of the Saybrook Library because it is less crowded and because they are allowed to eat. According to Professor Near, Head of Saybrook College, the opening of the dining hall as a study space after dinner was an alumnus’s idea. When he learned that students would appreciate a dining hall study space, the alumnus worked with the Saybrook facilities team to build a partition separating the kitchen area and the seating area. (No other dining hall will need a similar partition, since they all have doors that close once dining hours have ended.) Once Saybrook’s dining hall closes, it is cleaned by staff, who, upon finishing, close the partition, re-open the doors, and then leave.

Professor Near said that the use of the dining hall as a study space was an incredibly positive thing. He did note that two behavioral problems have occurred in the years that this policy has been in place. One student discharged a fire extinguisher in the dining hall, and another student climbed over the partition.
However, in both cases, the community effectively policed the incidents. As a result, Saybrook has no check-in or monitoring system for the dining hall during these hours. Overall, Professor Near said that Saybrugians like the dining halls as the study space, and he is happy to continue keeping it open. No other colleges have extended this option to their students.

PEER INSTITUTIONS

Yale’s peer institutions currently offer many variations of the proposed study space idea with success. Harvard Dining offers free “brain breaks” for all of their students, regardless of the time of year, by providing snacks such as bagels, cereal, pretzels, and chips, as well as a space in which students can mingle and relax in their dining halls from as early as 8:30PM Sunday through Thursday. After this time, the residential “House” dining halls remain open for all students, so they can utilize the now-quiet facility to complete their work instead of relocating to a library or separate space. The only dining hall which closes is the one exclusively for first-year students. This is a feature of Harvard which is spoken about positively on their tours and when attracting prospective students, and it has been noted to be extremely helpful and something to look forward to at night.1

Dartmouth utilizes a different system. While their main dining hall does close at 11 PM, the remaining dining halls stay open to students until 2 AM, providing baked goods, coffee, and multiple spaces for study groups to meet without having to compete for limited study and gathering spaces. While these dining halls may not be exclusively quiet, they nonetheless are places in which students can find comfort, whether by enjoying a cup of coffee with a friend after a night of studying, or by being in an environment that is less stressful than a large library.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from students at Yale in the 2017 YCC Fall Survey was stratified into two groups for this project: class year and residential college. 32% of students surveyed indicated that they typically remain in their suite when doing homework. While some of these students may prefer to remain in their rooms while studying, others likely make this choice due to the limited availability of study spaces at Yale. Notably, 30% of all students believe that finding a place to study in the evening is either somewhat or very difficult to do on an average night. Opening up the dining

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1 https://dining.harvard.edu/campus-dining/undergraduate-dining/hours-interhouse-restrictions
halls as study spaces not only increases the availability of sought-after tables and a quiet environment, but it also gives students a choice of where to study, so students do not feel stuck studying in one place all the time.

According to the survey, the peak time for evening studying is between the hours of 9 PM and 11 PM for all students. The proposed study spaces would be open from 9 PM until 1 AM, with the allowance of an extension on the tail end of the time slot depending on the college. Nearly ¾ of all students claim they would at least use this space at least occasionally, with Ezra Stiles, Pauli Murray, Trumbull, Davenport, and Berkeley\(^2\) being the colleges with the most interest in this program. For this reason, these would be the colleges best suited for pilot programs, prior to considering opening up the dining halls as study spaces to all students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement a pilot program in Ezra Stiles, Pauli Murray, Trumbull, Davenport, and Berkeley Colleges for one month, centered around midterms, tracking the level of usage by utilizing the scan-in machines linked to YaleConnect
- Hours of availability would be 9 PM to 1 AM, Sunday through Thursday
- Run the cost analysis of offering coffee and or hot water/tea. If miniscule, add these options to be served on a dining hall to dining hall basis

CONCLUSION

Yale provides a variety of study spaces for its students throughout campus. However, students are in favor of adding their residential college dining halls to that list. Through pilot programs, the frequency of usage of these dining halls as study spaces can be assessed. Our research of peer institutions shows that several other universities offer their students this option, and Saybrook College’s implementation of this idea demonstrates that Yale can institute this change without much difficulty, as Saybrook has done nothing more than keep the doors open and lights on when offering the dining hall as a study space. Since each residential college extends this option to their students for a week at the end of each semester, it seems reasonable for the option to be offered year-round.

\(^2\) Saybrook has been left out of this due to the fact that the study hall hours of this college are already in existence.